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AUTHOR Ross, David B.
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ABSTRACT

This article summarizes the performance of 52 college students who completed a one-credit class for the reduction of test anxiety. The anxiety reduction program uses a variety of study skills and behavioral strategies to improve school performance. The 8-to-10 week class is taught in small groups of from 2 to 6 students. Content focuses on: (1) understanding anxiety; (2) effective time management; (3) managing the moment of crisis; (4) active reading and memory; (5) healthy living habits; (6) test-taking strategies; and (7) rational thinking. Participants demonstrated slightly higher grade averages and improved course completion. Personal comments from the students suggested that some of them had experienced great changes in attitude toward school and life in general. (Contains 6 references.) (SLD)

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Group Reduction of Test Anxiety: Does it Really Work?

by David B. Ross, EdD
The College of Lake County
19351 W. Washington St.
Grayslake, IL 60030
708-223-6601 ext. 2352
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Group Reduction of Test Anxiety: Does it Really Work?

Abstract

This article summarizes the performance of 52 college students who completed a class for the reduction of test anxiety. The anxiety reduction program uses a variety of study skills and behavioral strategies to improve school performance. Participants demonstrated slightly higher grade averages and improved course completion. Personal comments from the students suggested that some of them had experienced great changes in attitude toward school and life in general.

Since 1990 this author has been enrolling students in a credit class titled, "School Anxiety Reduction." The students use a workbook, audio tapes and small group meetings to work on the reduction of test, math and speech anxiety. Does this program really work? Do the strategies actually result in changes in academic performance or attitude on the part of the participants? The following summary is an attempt to begin the process of answering these questions.

From the Fall 1990 semester through the Fall 1993 semester, fifty two students completed the test anxiety option of a one credit hour "school anxiety reduction" class at the College of Lake County. They completed this eight to ten week class in small groups ranging from two to six students. To determine the long term effects of the program the transcripts of the students were reviewed and a survey was sent allowing them to describe the long term effects.

STRUCTURE OF THE ANXIETY REDUCTION PROGRAM

The anxiety reduction program at the College of Lake County is offered as a one credit hour class. Students are given the option to complete it through either small group sessions or individual counselor meetings. They use a workbook and audio tapes (Ross, 1992) that assist them in practicing the skills. The largest number of students request assistance for the reduction of test anxiety. A few students request assistance for the reduction of speech anxiety. The speech anxiety students receive a special workbook and their performance was not included in this summary. There are numerous underlying factors contained in the structure of the program:

1. There are multiple causes of the anxiety. It is rare that a single element causes the anxiety. For most students it is a combination of poor study habits, negative previous experiences and attitudes, general stress in their lives, and countless other potential sources. Therefore, the treatment of the anxiety should involve multiple strategies. The same treatment approach does not work for every student.

2. One needs to build a commitment to change. A couple short workshops or simple suggestions cannot change the long-standing behavioral elements of school anxiety. The student needs to practice the skills in order to effect a significant change. Purchasing the workbooks, paying tuition, the expectation of completing assignments works to build this commitment. We deceive our students if we do not tell them that it takes hard work to change.

3. Attitudes are important. How we feel about ourselves and school alter our performance. Improved study habits and learning relaxation skills is generally not enough to fully reduce the anxiety, the student needs to develop realistic and positive attitudes toward school. Many years of failing tests will erode the positive attitudes of even the most optimistic person. Attitudes are hard to change, but positive support and incremental successes will result in a gradual change.

Because of the above factors, the program is structured to require the students to practice the skills on a regular basis and it exposes them to a wide variety of activities. Most of the skills are introduced in one unit, then reinforced in subsequent units. The following is the outline of the content of the Test Anxiety Reduction Workbook:

1. What is Anxiety and How Did I Get It? It is helpful for students to understand that the anxiety is a learned behavior, they aren't just "going crazy." In this unit they learn about the causes, treatments and physiology of anxiety. They complete a personal assessment that helps them analyze the

sources of their anxiety and suggests the treatment strategies that are most likely to help them. They begin the process of learning the relaxation skills that will be necessary to control the physical reactions of the anxiety.

The physical relaxation training continues throughout the class and is delivered both through in-class practice and audio tapes that are used at home. There are two elements to the relaxation program: a.) A six-step desensitization. b.) A deep breathing/fantasy method that can be used in the middle of class or a test

2. Effective Time Management. One significant source of anxiety are general life stressors. A busy, overwhelmed person is more likely to have anxiety problems. A variety of personal and school time management strategies are reviewed and practiced through homework assignments.

3. Managing the Moment of Crisis. In this unit the concept of "coping strategies" is introduced (Ottens, 1984). The goal is not to be able to totally eliminate anxiety from one's life, but to learn methods to keep in control and function more effectively. In-class physical relaxation strategies are taught, practice is given at using positive self-talk, and suggestions are made about how to better manage the testing situation (i.e., read through the test, relax before you begin).

4. Active Reading and Memory. Anxious students have great difficulty remembering material that has been studied, they frequently report "going blank." Relaxation helps this blanking, so does improved mastery of the study material. Students are taught a variety of methods to get more physically and mentally involved in their study.

5. Healthy Living Habits. Many school anxious students also have poor self-care habits. Blood sugar problems are common with these students. Instruction is provided on a more

appropriate diet as well as exercise and physical conditioning strategies.

6. Test Taking Strategies. There are many relatively simple tricks that students can learn which dramatically improve their performance. These include: underlining key words, skipping around, and outlining essay questions. Students practice these with sample tests. They also bring in tests taken in other classes so that patterns of testing errors can be analyzed.

7. Rational Thinking. These students use a lot of thinking that includes statements like: "I can't", "I'll fail again", "Everyone knows that I can't pass this class." Using a modified version of Ellis' Rational Emotive Therapy (Ellis, 1977), students will analyze their self-talk and find ways to substitute more positive and rational statements.

Flexibility is the key to the anxiety reduction program. What works for one student many not work for another. Students must sample a variety of strategies until they find the ones that work most effectively. The small group delivery seems to be more effective than individual counseling because of the support, modeling and encouragement provided by the other students.

A FOLLOW-UP OF STUDENTS WHO HAVE COMPLETED THE PROGRAM

In the time period from the Fall semester of 1990 through the Fall semester of 1993, 52 students completed the above test anxiety reduction program with the author. Because the students completed the program at different times and had slightly different experiences, it is not possible to employ powerful statistical methods to compare their performance to each other and to students in general. However an attempt was made to summarize the following:

> What percentage of credit hours attempted did the students complete in the terms prior to, during, and after taking the anxiety reduction class, and what was the GPA for the term?

The following table summarizes the performance of the 52 students who completed the anxiety reduction class for the term prior to, during and after taking the class:

	Prior	During	After
# Students Enrolled	41	52	44
Ave. Hours Attempted	7.5	8.5	8.0
% Credits Completed	75.2%	78.5%	83.8%
GPA for term.	2.68	2.68	2.84

The students are fairly "normal" community college students because the average credit load is well below full time and they only complete about 70% of all credits attempted (College of Lake County, 1993). The students demonstrated modest improvement, but for reasons stated earlier it is difficult to state the statistical significance of the change. Grade performance is one measure of the effect of a class like this, but much of the impact of the school anxiety is within the subjective realm of the individual. A survey was also sent to the 52 students and 15 returned detailed responses. In the survey the students were simply asked to provide a narrative description of the long term effect of the class and the specific components that were the most helpful. Their responses give a flavor of the personal effect it has had on their lives. Many of these

students had developed very negative self images. In a few situations the improvement has made a dramatic change in their life that is not fully reflected in the statistical summary of the grades. Consider the following examples:

1. A returning adult male about 30 years of age:

PDS101 helped me so much. I could see some difference in the amount of anxiety during test time has decreased. But I have continued using the relaxation at home and before a test. This has made a very big difference in my life. I have a 4.00 GPA at XXXX College and I am graduating this summer with an AAS and next may want an A.S.

2. A returning adult female about 40 years of age:

Short term: I would start to feel myself being engulfed by the black cloud of stress during a test. Then I would set down my pen, close my eyes, breathe and find my focal point. I was more concerned with answering some of the questions correct, than whether I was able to finish at all. Long term: when I have a project or deadline I transport myself to my relaxation and focal point, and when I feel secure I start again. I also find getting up and walking away for a few minutes helps.

3. A female recent high school graduate:

Prior to taking PDS101, I never studied and had a negative attitude about test taking. I seemed to only get D's and F's on tests. I was not organized either, I never took the time to study. After PDS101 I became very well organized, not only with my school work, but with test taking also. I managed my study time better, and for preparing for a test I feel more confident and am getting A's, B's and occasionally C's on my tests. This class, as I said above, has changed my life. I no longer get nervous when taking tests. It is the best class I have ever taken. It is a class that helps people with test anxiety, building self confidence and relaxation in any situation.

4. A returning adult female in her late 30s entering the highly stressful registered Nursing program.

Before my class I literally lived off Tagamet and Tylenol, to handle the anxiety brought on by my classes. It seemed like no matter what I did, I just couldn't calm down, and it was a terrible time. Shortly after I took the class, I had quite a bit of improvement, but began to fall back into my old behaviors. I went back to review my notes, used my tapes, and over a short period I was 75% better than before. And now, a year later, I still apply the same techniques to my nursing classes. Because I was desperate to get help dealing with my

> anxiety, I was just so willing to try anything to get some relief, and these concepts and strategies and exercises made a world of difference for me and my school work.

Not all the comments, however, reflect these dramatic changes in their lives. Many of these students come with serious conflicts or problems that are not easily changed by a class of this nature. This summary only includes students who have completed the class Some students did not complete the program and have continued to have difficulty. One student, a man in his mid-forties, who suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome as a result of the Vietnam war commented:

> My anxiety has not changed other than has gotten worse. I get these rushes really bad now. Your program helped me for short periods and occasionally I use the tapes when I don't lose them from lack of memory. For long term use I take medication.

Obviously this class is not a panacea for all the school problems that these students are having, but it does provide them with tools that they can use to improve their probability of success. On the survey students commented on the specific strategies that helped them the most. The comments supported the contention (as mentioned earlier in this article) that their are multiple causes for the anxiety. Numerous students stated that the relaxation helped them the most, but nearly every student mentioned a different aspect that helped them as well: time management,

notetaking, general study skills, attitudes, test taking strategies, dietary changes. Each one of them discovered one or two different elements that they incorporated into their study routine.

In conclusion, the group treatment of test anxiety did result in a slight improvement in grades and course completion. On a personal level the students reported changes in their attitudes about school and their lives in general.

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